

EVALUATING THE CRITICAL EDITION OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*: INFERENTIAL MILEAGE AND THE APPARATUS MATERIALS

Christopher Austin

1. Introduction

I have always liked the definition of obsession as the response to a situation we can neither change nor cease thinking about. Perhaps one of the most fundamental issues of *Mahābhārata* (MBh) research—an issue that scholars have typically found impossible to resolve or cease thinking about—is the precise nature and identity of the Bhandarkar or Pune critical text. Over the course of almost half a century, the editors of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute worked to trace a path through the maze of extant manuscripts of the MBh, in the end identifying a form of the epic which appears to lie at the base of all the extant written Sanskrit manuscripts. This basic form of the poem was then published as the critical text, accompanied by the voluminous manuscript additions and variations preserved in the critical apparatus below the root text, and in appendices at the end of each volume. The basic Critical Edition (CE) text has been characterized in many ways, and has been called “a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to reach” (Sukthankar 1933 vol.1: ciii), a “written archetype” (Fitzgerald 1991: 152-153), a textual archetype that “takes us back to the text’s first composition” (Hiltebeitel 2005: 459), a “normative redaction” (Bigger 2002: 17-31), a “kind of screen-shot” (Bigger 2002: 20). Simon Brodbeck has recently written about the benefits and shortfalls of arboreal and fluvial models for thinking about this form of the text and its relation to later manuscripts (Brodbeck 2009: 3-12), and characterizes the CE

as “an integral text, intentionally produced as an artefact, and placed before an ancient human audience for appreciation and dispersal” (Brodbeck 2009: 7). Other articulations and conceptions could be multiplied.

In what follows, I offer first some exploratory thoughts on the often tacit argumentative strategies deployed within competing models for understanding the nature of this CE text, and in particular I will be concerned to identify how, if at all, the various policies articulated on how we should approach this text are impacted by the apparatus and appendix materials. Secondly, I will be concerned to examine closely the scope of and role played by inference—particularly within diachronic approaches to the MBh—in order to confront the matter of what is and is not reasonable for us to infer on the basis of the MBh’s later or post-archetypal materials. In taking up these issues my purpose is not to deliver a review of scholarship or bibliographic essay, but rather to explore in more abstract terms some of the important presuppositions and premises underlying the ongoing conversation about the nature of the CE text.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I will use here a basic formula for thinking about the CE archetype, the changes which were worked upon it in various regional manuscript traditions of India, and the hypothesized stages of development prior to, and purportedly detectable within, the archetype. If we accept that such an archetypal document existed (let us call it “M”), and that the basic CE text at least approximates this document, we may think of it as existing at time 0 (M_0); later manuscript variants and additions (the material of the CE apparatus and appendices) then may be framed as M_{+1} , M_{+2} , M_{+3} , etc. Geographic distinctions within this post- M_0 material are clear enough, but the same cannot be said for temporal distinctions. Hence while we know that this material accreted gradually and in various geographic contexts as M_{+1} , M_{+2} , M_{+3} , etc., it is typically much more difficult to define the actual chronological relationships between them, and thus I will group them into a collective M_{+N} .¹ But there is ultimately no real debate over what this M_{+N} material represents, or over the relationship it bears to M_0 . The issue that does divide scholars is whether or not it is possible to hypothesize, on the basis of the CE archetype, moments or stages of that text’s prior development. The manuscripts of the MBh surviving into the 20th century and made available to the Bhandarkar scholars led back reductively to the construction of the CE base text or “archetype” (M_0) which now marks the point beyond which further reduction or editorial work becomes speculative. Whether or not the study of M_0 can permit us to infer anything meaningful about the MBh at M_{+N} , and whether

it is necessary or even desirable to do so, are some of the most elementary points of contention within epic scholarship, more often than not operating tacitly (but never far from the surface). The principal concern of this paper is to examine the role played by the M_{+N} materials in the articulation of research policies on the configuration of M_0 and M_{-N} .

“Synthetic” and “analytic” remain today the most common labels applied to epic researchers for characterizing the two most clearly opposed views on this matter of how we should read the epic, and how, if at all, to conceive of the relationship between the possible or imagined M_{-N} moments and M_0 . “Synthetic” and “analytic” are convenient and elegant terms, but of course they mask over arguments, strategies and research agendas that are ultimately far more complex and nuanced than these terms allow, and may be resisted by both parties to whom they are applied.² With apologies for perpetuating their use, I will nonetheless employ here the unsatisfactory but convenient terms “synthetic” or “synchronous” for the one orientation and “analytic” or “diachronic” for the other. I will suggest that perhaps one way we can look at the so-called synthetic vs. analytic debate is by identifying within it a disagreement over which principles of argument and reasoning should prevail in articulating a response to what might be called the exhaustion of data at M_0 and the projection beyond it to possible or imagined M_{-N} moments of the MBh’s career. In other words, the disagreement in scholarship is, in my view, not limited simply to a divergence of views as to what the MBh may have looked like prior to M_0 , but over what principles of argument and reasoning should be privileged when we seek to understand the relationship between M_{-N} and M_0 . Once again, a key issue here is the role played by M_{+N} within these arguments.

2. Strategies and Premises of Synchronous Readings

To spell out some of the more basic working policies that drive synchronous readings of the MBh, I would first observe that not all who are convinced that the epic should be read synchronously share the same model of the text’s composition. I would suggest there are two basic types of synchronous approaches to the poem, namely the “unifying redaction” and “short-term composition” models. The former tends to acknowledge a possibly extended chronology for the poem, but emphasizes the MBh’s inner consistency and continuity, attributing this to a definitive process of unifying redaction. The latter model, principally defined in the work of Alf Hiltebeitel, sees the poem as a large-scale, short-term literary creation.³ Thus, distancing himself from the “unifying redaction” model, Hiltebeitel states in a 2005 essay: “There

remains debate as to whether this archetype [represented by the CE text, our M_0] takes us back to the text's first composition, or to a later redaction that would put a final stamp on centuries of cumulative growth. This essay favors the first option" (Hiltebeitel 2005: 459).

Whether inspired by a final stamp or short-term composition model, for those who adopt a synthetic or synchronous approach to the poem, the minimization or absence of concern with M_{-N} hypotheticals is tied to a conviction of the integrity of the M_0 text as received. Biardeau and Hiltebeitel in particular have advocated comprehensive readings that identify, among other things, structural symmetry, thematic mirroring and repetition of motifs which stand out as conspicuous witnesses to the literary integrity of the MBh—witnesses that are felt by most synchronous readers to attest either the thoroughgoing nature of the text's definitive redaction, or the deliberate, self-conscious literary activity of the poem's author.⁴ Here the persuasive nature of the results of the holistic reading authorizes further reading along the same lines, and empowers a handling of the MBh increasingly as a literary work in direct defiance of older models which claimed of the poem, for example, that "by no means can we see in [the MBh] the work of an author, indeed not even that of a skillful compiler or arranger (Winternitz 1908-22: vol.1 p.272)." The fruits of synchronous readings—that is, the revelation of large-scale patterns, repeated motifs, and persistent themes across the text—thus become some of the most compelling kinds of evidence for the policy that it is not possible, and more importantly not necessary, to imagine that M_{-N} moments could be identified as chronologically distinct strata within M_0 .

Supporting this basic argumentative strategy of synthetic readings is a careful criticism of the competing method—that is to say of the analytic or diachronic approaches to the poem which do allow considerable freedom in hypothesizing M_{-N} moments as identifiable within M_0 . Any number of critiques could be cited here, but perhaps chief among them is the charge that such analytic quests for M_{-N} moments may fall prey to circularity in argumentation. A scholar may decide at the outset, for example, that the MBh was first a warrior epic, and only later came into the hands of Brahmins, without providing independent evidence to this effect. On the basis of this assumption, "layers" of text ($M_{-3} + M_{-2} + M_{-1} = M_{-N}$ etc.) are posited and a circle of argumentation is closed in upon itself when it is concluded that M_{-N} moments (e.g. "kṣatriya," "brahminic" phases, etc.) can be identified within or even excavated from the text of M_0 .⁵

Synchronous readings thus draw their authority in part from the fruits

they bear, and in addition from the defensive maneuvering which points up some of the shortfalls of the principal alternative approach. Much more of course could be said of the rhetorical strategies of synchronous readings, but I would like to focus here on the matter of how competing models of epic research imagine the relationship between M_0 and hypothesized M_{-N} moments. The basic principle of research privileged by the synchronous reader when considering the M_{-N} : M_0 problem is: we should privilege available data over inference and conjecture. The CE text of the “ M_0 moment” should be embraced as it comes to us, reconstituted by the Bhandarkar scholars, and itself should form the basis of research on the MBh, rather than act as a launching platform for conjectures as to what might have preceded it. If many scholars find synchronous readings convincing, it is surely on account of the compelling fruits they bear which point up the literary integrity of the poem; but perhaps in a more fundamental sense (and perhaps for this reason less often articulated explicitly), they have at their foundation a solid and reliable premise of research: available data itself obviously has more substance and authority than inferences drawn from that data. Synchronous readings respect the data as received; diachronic readings search between the lines and project beyond this data.

3. Strategies and Premises of Diachronic Readings

But it might be asked: What is so wrong with reading between the lines and projecting beyond available data? We can hardly imagine such a thing as academic inquiry otherwise. Turning to the analytic approach as understood in its own terms, we find at work quite the opposing principle of argument governing the policy on imagining the relationship between M_{-N} and M_0 : Here it may be asserted that it is reasonable to build, on the basis of available evidence, inferences about things for which we have no evidence. Or, to articulate this claim in the terms I have proposed, it may be argued that it is reasonable to infer that the same processes and patterns of textual growth which followed M_0 (i.e. the many M_{+N} moments documented in the CE apparatus) also preceded M_0 ; just as the M_0 text was established reductively from M_{+N} by the Bhandarkar editors through lower textual criticism, hypotheses about M_{-N} can be established from M_0 through higher textual criticism. Proudfoot thus writes:

[I]n the light of the persuasive evidence provided by the compilation of the Poona Critical Edition which irrefutably demonstrates that a great many

accretions both extensive and minute have been added to branches of the Mahābhārata tradition subsequent to the time of the archetypal text, it is unreasonable not to accept that there has been accretion anterior to the archetypal text. (Proudfoot 1979: 45-46)

Dunham similarly points to the evidence of the later manuscript additions (our “M_{+N}”) in order to discourage the notion that the CE text can reliably be taken as any kind of archetype or original document:

The collection and comparison of a large number of manuscripts from a wide area of the subcontinent ... has conclusively demonstrated that all the extant manuscripts, whatever their place or origin and whatever the version or recension to which they might be assigned, have been subject to a process of addition and alteration that has occurred for the entire period for which there is manuscript evidence at least. There is no such thing as a static branch of the manuscript tradition anywhere in India. There is no “pure” version of the *Mahābhārata*, a version that has steadfastly resisted the inclusion of new material from manuscripts or other sources, a perfect copy of the first text (Dunham 1991: 11-12).

Dunham then goes on to express doubt about whether there was ever a time in Indian history when the MBh was not undergoing the kinds of processes of change and addition attested by the CE apparatus (Dunham 1991: 15).

Perhaps one of the most succinct summaries of this way of viewing the poem—i.e. that our evaluation of what the CE text represents must be impacted by the fact of its substantial later additions—comes from Andreas Bigger, who characterizes the CE archetype as the “normative redaction” of the MBh: “[The CE] text is just a kind of screen shot, a frozen moment in a floating tradition. That this tradition kept floating, even after the normative redaction, can be seen by the many [apparatus] and appendix passages which are found in the mss” (Bigger 2002: 20). Thus Bigger sees the critically constituted text as the form of the poem that remains when the available evidence used for seeking out the manuscript common denominator (M₀) has been exhausted; perhaps if more manuscript evidence were found, the poem could be reduced further to earlier moments. Important here in his framing of the “M₀” moment is the looming presence of the subsequent M_{+N} materials, which establish the patterns of flux and inflation of the normative redaction over time. For Bigger it is thus only natural to seek, now through higher text-critical tools, these same patterns of flux and inflation within the M₀ text itself (Bigger 2002: 20).

The analytic approach to the MBh was the norm in early days of epic scholarship prior to the completion of the CE. However, the appearance of the Bhandarkar edition has by no means dissuaded this manner of reading the poem: contemporary scholars adopting an analytic approach place considerable stock in the evidence that the CE offers of the diachronic relationship between M_0 and M_{+N} for authorizing the same kinds of hypotheses regarding diachronic relationships between M_{+N} and M_0 as had been articulated in earlier scholarship of the 19th and early-20th centuries. Here we cannot help but imagine that, if Winternitz, Hopkins and their peers could see the CE, they would feel vindicated in having insisted that the text as received by them contained identifiable diachronic strata, for indeed it did, and some of the material known to them in the Bombay and Calcutta editions is now relegated to the CE apparatus as later additions to M_0 . And so now that we have discovered this distinction between M_0 and M_{+N} , we may feel entitled and empowered to make inferences about M_{+N} . This in effect allows contemporary analytic scholars to read the CE much as the older scholars read the Calcutta or Bombay text, but now with even more confidence in the basic working hypothesis that the MBh textual tradition constantly accreted material over time.

There are of course other grounds upon which diachronic readings can build, but as above, I wish to identify here a basic principle of reasoning and argument: it is reasonable to build, on the basis of available evidence, inferences about things for which we have no evidence. If we have nothing available to take us back beyond M_0 —no means to trace with any certainty the processes leading to and producing the archetype—we may look to the evidence of M_{+N} which may leave us with the suspicion that the M_0 text represented by the CE will, upon inspection, reveal some of the same kinds of patterns of addition and accretion as do the manuscripts from which it was constituted. According to this view, to resist the possibility of M_{+N} moments is to turn the “screen shot” of the CE into a kind of Ur-MBh. Perhaps most importantly, it may be suggested that the evidence of M_{+N} makes the refusal to consider the existence of M_{+N} unreasonable.

We enter here into one of the knottiest points of the debate, and arrive at a sticking point in dialogue between those adopting synchronous and diachronic approaches to the text. How precisely this charge of unreasonableness might be rejoined varies according to whether the synchronous reader operates according to the above-mentioned model of unifying redaction or according to the short-term literary creation model of the kind proposed by Hiltebeitel.

For those seeing the M_0 archetype as a literary artefact with a history of development, but unified in a definitive redactorial process or by a “final stamp,” it might be argued: we are not unreasonable; we do not deny that there were likely M_{-N} moments, only that there are any reliable means for recovering them. While there was surely an extended process of authorship, redaction and textual creation prior to M_0 , perhaps to a certain extent analogous to the kinds of changes attested by the CE apparatus, the text has been so thoroughly woven together—again, according to this model, in a comprehensive act of redaction—that to try to extract portions and identify them as M_{-3} , M_{-2} , M_{-1} etc., would be, to take the traditional *nīrakṣīravivekanyāya* somewhat out of context, like trying to draw milk from water (but we are not swans, nor need we aspire to be, since a seamless, homogeneous product is precisely what the redactor must have desired).⁶ The resistance here is thus not to the possible existence of M_{-N} moments or diachronic stratifications within M_0 , but to the feasibility and desirability of identifying them.

Alternately, should one approach the CE archetype as a literary document created over a shorter period of time, the charge of unreasonableness might be met in the following way. The very existence of M_{-N} tells us nothing about the nature of M_0 as a literary artefact. Even if the archetype as we have it today had been concocted *ex nihilo* in a week through a prodigious act of creation, there is no reason why such a text would not then accrete later additions over time as the M_0 text clearly did. For one already convinced of the text’s short-term composition, the existence of M_{-N} does not speak meaningfully to the nature of M_0 . In other words, the fact of later manuscript additions does not constitute any kind of challenge to the hypothesis that the CE text as received represents a piece of literature created under strict principles of design over a short period of time. Hence when such a synchronous reader resists the notion that the same kinds of changes that followed M_0 must have also preceded it, there is no question of being unreasonable. This of course cannot be extended into a positively persuasive argument for the short-term creation hypothesis, but it is important to note that the charge of unreasonableness, based on the formula “ M_{-N} is to M_0 as M_0 is to M_{-N} ,” cannot find any purchase on those already committed to the short-term literary creation model for the CE archetype.

This of course is not the end of the conversation; from this point, further rounds of exchange between the camps could be identified. Rather than tracing the conflict further, however, I will recap the development thus far. What I would like to emphasize once again are the basic principles

of argument and reasoning which I feel, although not often spelled out explicitly, drive these approaches in important ways. Again, there is little debate on what M_{+N} represents in relation to M_0 , but understanding what, if anything, M_{+N} might consist of in relation to M_0 seems to me governed by two opposed policies. The first of these, characterizing synchronous readings, is that available data should be privileged over conjecture. The second policy, characterizing diachronic readings, is that drawing inferences on the basis of patterns in available data is only reasonable.

Equally polarizing and directly implicated in all of this are the views on what is or is not reasonable when considering how the evidence of M_{+N} should affect our reading of M_0 . For the synchronous reader, whose concerns with M_{+N} moments of the poem are minimal or absent altogether, the CE's appendix and apparatus materials do not cast any kind of shadow on the process of reading the text as a literary whole. For one seeing the CE archetype as the product of a definitive and homogenizing redactorial process, it may be acknowledged that the epic had a history of development, and as such that the processes whereby M_0 accreted M_{+N} materials might also have characterized the production of M_0 . But it is not possible, necessary or even desirable to sift out the discrete M_{+N} moments; there are no swan-tools for reliably extracting the milk from the water, and in any case to do so would be to miss the point altogether of reading so thoroughly integrated a text. For one seeing the CE archetype as the product of a short-term literary creation, M_{+N} does not affect the reading of M_0 at all: the archetype was simply created over a short period of time and then accreted material over the centuries; there is no reason to insist that this post-compositional accretive process should colour or inform the model of the archetype's authorship.

On the other side, meanwhile, the M_{+N} materials do indeed cast a shadow on the reading of M_0 , prompting suspicion and nurturing the conviction that the archetype is better conceived as what we are left with when we arrive at the end of the evidence trail (cf. Bigger's "screen shot") rather than as a polished or completed literary work (cf. Brodbeck's "integral text, intentionally produced as an artefact, and placed before an ancient human audience for appreciation and dispersal.") The analytic reader's resistance to treating the CE text as a finished or closed literary document thus may arise in part from a persisting doubt that the reductive process whereby this document was recovered could have been complete or definitive; this may even be suggested by Sukthankar himself when referring to the CE text as "a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to reach" (Sukthankar

1933 vol.1: ciii). From this perspective, the apparatus and appendix materials, which illustrate the freedom of the Indian manuscript traditions to add, interpolate and alter the contents of the epic, come to constitute a powerful presence which cannot but affect the reading of the basic CE text. Again, the implicit formula here is: M_{-N} is to M_0 as M_0 is to M_{+N} .

While it may seem we have arrived at an impasse, I would like in the remaining half of this essay to unpack further this matter of what is and is not reasonable when drawing, from the appendix and apparatus materials, inferences about the CE archetype and its possible prior moments of development. How much inferential mileage can M_{+N} truly provide for hypotheses on M_{-N} ? My concern is now to identify the limits on what the evidence of the appendix and apparatus materials can in fact authorize in terms of inferences about M_{-N} . Below I will identify two aspects in particular of the M_{+N} materials which I feel ought to impact directly the scope of inferences made about M_{-N} .

4. The Inferential Mileage of the Apparatus Materials

The first fact about the M_{+N} material which should impact the kinds of hypotheses floated about M_{-N} has already been alluded to: we have been speaking of M_{+N} and not M_{+1} , M_{+2} , M_{+3} , M_{+4} , etc., because for the most part it is very difficult to actually stratify the critical apparatus and appendix materials diachronically: we know additions were made over time, but in large part these materials come to us telescoped into a clump in each manuscript grouping. Geographic distinctions of course are made, but even then there are many passages the provenance of which cannot be determined with certainty—i.e. passages shared in most but not all manuscripts, and as such just fall short of making the “critical cut.” And so, while we can specify that such-and-such Bengali manuscript and such-and-such Malayālam manuscript both added their own contributions to the same portion of CE text independently, there is usually little immediate internal evidence that allows us to know when these additions were made relative one to the other. If then we are indeed going to take M_{+N} as a basis for inferences about M_{-N} , this same basic pattern must be projected back prior to M_0 as well. That is, if we are going to argue that the same kinds of changes which took place subsequent to M_0 also took place before, we must assign to M_{-N} the same telescoped nature as the M_{+N} .

But there is yet a more fundamental problem here: the M_{+N} materials attest a wide geographic range of independent localized contributions to

a received archetype; the M_0 archetype is arrived at precisely by removing these local variations. Thus, Sukthankar remarks that “the differences between the various recensions and versions of the Mahābhārata must diminish as we go back further and further” (Sukthankar vol. 1933: xxix). To what extent, then, do the later, geographically specific M_{+N} accretions help us in understanding what may have preceded M_0 ? Are the changes that may have preceded M_0 of the same nature as those which followed it? I think they may be, but only to a limited extent: the actual pattern revealed through the lower textual critical work of the Bhandarkar scholars is (when viewed retroactively from the finished product) one of gradual diminution of regional variation. Thus the notion that we must infer the same kinds of changes preceded M_0 as followed it appears in fact to have a very limited applicability: limited, that is, if we actually pay attention to the M_{+N} data which purportedly authorizes inferences about M_{-N} . What we may be permitted to imagine prior to M_0 is not a mirror reversal of the potentially infinite later additions (M_{+N}), but a necessarily limited retrojection of the ever-diminishing variant additions upon an archetypal base.

A second issue here concerns the location of M_{+N} materials and their distribution across the M_0 base. It does not follow from the fact that certain portions of the MBh have attracted a great deal of redactorial revisiting within the M_{+N} materials that we should read all portions of the epic equally with an eye suspicious of abundant alteration. What the evidence of M_{+N} shows us is that certain portions of the poem have been significantly reworked by later tradition, others not. Let us frame this issue in terms of Bigger’s “screen shot.” Bigger’s phrase suggests a text undergoing constant change, captured by the CE only at a certain moment in its long career. Prior to this frozen moment we may feel entitled to infer changes similar to those we know took place subsequently. This may give the impression of an open and fluid textual tradition wherein any and all portions of the poem may be imagined to have accreted material over time. But let us now imagine this “screen” is divided into 18 squares, one for each *parvan*. Comparing this screen at M_0 with the final M_{+N} state, will we see the same amount of change in all 18 squares? No: the evidence of M_{+N} does not attest constant change and accretion uniformly for all parts of the MBh.

Books 15-18, for example, have never attracted the same kind of redactorial attention and revisiting as other portions of the poem. Barring variations on the closing *phalaśruti* verses (18.5.31-54; App. 18 nos.1-3), these four last books contain only a single passage of 20 lines (16 App. 1) deemed long enough

to warrant relegation to the appendix. Book 3 by contrast features 32 such appendix passages. Book 3 is of course longer than books 15-18 put together, but if we actually compare book 3 with the final 4 books in terms of how much appendix material they carry proportionally to their respective CE texts, the numbers are, roughly: in book 3, approximately 1 verse of appendix material for every 11.4 CE verses (approximately 890 verses of appendix material over 10,141 verses of CE text). For books 15-18, taken as a unit, we have 1 verse of appendix material for every 163.5 CE verses (10 verses of appendix material over 1,635 verses of CE text).⁷ We thus have, as it were, completely incomparable $M_0:M_N$ ratios of 10.5:1 for book 3 and 163.5:1 for books 15-18. The point here is that we must not imagine that M_N evidence of abundant accretion in book 3 can authorize or make more plausible inferences about abundant accretions within books 15-18. There is no evidence that these latter 4 books underwent the same kind of change that book 3 did. And so, if we respect the rules of inference when claiming that it is reasonable to infer that the same processes and patterns of textual growth which followed M_0 also preceded M_0 , we may indeed feel more entitled to entertain hypotheses on M_N moments of book 3, but much less so—not at all, I would argue—for books 15-18.

6. Conclusion

I have attempted to focus above on one aspect of analytic readings of the MBh, identifying the way in which the evidence of the diachronic relationship between M_0 and M_N empowers or authorizes hypotheses about M_N . The very existence of the CE apparatus and appendices is a major argumentative reference point for many of those who wish to seek out moments within the M_0 archetype, for, it is sometimes argued, it is only reasonable to infer that the kinds of changes that took place after M_0 also took place before. We have seen that this claim is challenged by synchronous readers of the MBh, for whom the evidence of the apparatus and appendix materials does not speak to or impact the evaluation of the M_0 text. While M_N moments may be acknowledged by a reader adopting the “definitive redaction” model, the feasibility and desirability of recovering such moments is resisted. Meanwhile M_N is simply not a factor affecting the literary short-term creation model.

Rather than dismiss outright the analytic reader’s claims regarding reasonable inference evidence, however, I have decided here to follow through with the notion that the appendix and apparatus materials may bear upon and shape our understanding of the nature of the CE text. I have done this because I do believe it is necessary and worthwhile at times to

project beyond data as received and that inference can play an important role even in the difficult and sometimes treacherous world of epic scholarship. Furthermore, important as the above cited synthetic defenses are, they do not constitute positively persuasive arguments, and cannot be deployed to dissuade an analytic reader from certain fundamental suspicions that the CE text as we have it today underwent a process of development prior to the M_0 moment, and that it is both possible and worthwhile to trace this development.

I have opted, then, to think through the claim that inferences about M_{-N} are only reasonable given the evidence of M_{+N} ; the same kinds of changes that followed the archetype must have preceded it as well. If we take this claim seriously, what kinds of changes will we find actually took place? If we pay attention to what the M_{+N} material actually tells us, and only draw inferences that are appropriate and proportional to the data it offers, I argue that we will not be warranted in venturing very far. In fact we will find first that the extent to which we can conceivably retroject M_{+N} additions prior to M_0 is limited by the very pattern established in the course of the CE text's production of diminishing variation upon an archetype (and thus there is no danger of retrojecting a potentially infinite number of prior M_{-N} moments). Secondly, we have seen that the domains across the text where M_{+N} evidence authorizes us to imagine similar M_{-N} changes is limited as well: not all sections of the epic have accreted material equally. I have drawn attention to these patterns in order to ask, albeit it in abstract terms, whether hypotheses on the state and nature of the MBh prior to its form as the CE archetype—hypotheses sometimes authorized or enabled by the evidence of the archetype's latter additions and developments—are in fact proportional or commensurate with the kinds of changes attested by those later additions.

I return again to this formula: one way of characterizing the differences between synthetic and analytic approaches to the epic is to identify behind them the conflicting principles of research implicit in their conceptions of the relationship between M_{-N} and M_0 ; available data should be privileged over conjecture and hypotheses built from that data; inferences are reasonable and necessary for the advance of scholarship. In particular I have attempted to explore here the role played by the CE's later materials (" M_{+N} ") in these (more often than not tacitly adopted) strategies for thinking about the MBh, and have sought to gauge the amount of "inferential mileage" that post-archetypal materials actually offer for hypotheses on M_{-N} . This very short discussion of course has not aimed to resolve any of the larger persisting disagreements

within epic scholarship; however, I will deem it a modest success if it has managed to cast some light on why some scholars, myself included, have neither wholly accepted as resolved the matter of the identity of the CE text, nor been able to cease thinking about it.

Endnotes

1. For important examples of work which do carefully chart chronological distinctions within the later manuscript materials, see Mahadevan 2008; Mahadevan 2009; (this volume); Hildebeitel 2006; Hildebeitel Mahadevan (this volume).

2. “Synthetic” of course implies that one is deliberately treating as a unit something which is in fact heterogeneous or otherwise composite in nature—but that the text simply is a unit is precisely the starting conviction of so-called synthetic readings; for such a reader, its holistic nature is an inherent quality of the text and not engineered through a “synthesizing” reading. Similarly the so-called “analytic” readers who approach the epic with the twin conviction that it has grown over time and that such growth is detectable within the poem do not see their work as artificially splitting through contrived analysis an initially homogeneous text, but simply as pointing to the stages of its natural growth over time.

3. See especially Hildebeitel 2001: 20-21. Towards the end of her career Biarreau appears to have approached this model as well, asserting that the poem is “the unique work of a poet or of a small team of brahmin poets, attached to one or more allied royal courts, but working in strict collaboration. Nonetheless, the hypothesis of the single author remains preferable on account of the strength of the conception of the whole [poem] as it is (Biarreau 2002: vol. 1, 139).”

4. Biarreau’s text was not the CE but the larger Vulgate (Kinjawadekar 1929-1936). On Biarreau’s response to the CE, see Biarreau 1968.

5. Notable here for their criticisms of such kinds of argumentation are Hildebeitel’s review of Katz 1989 (Hildebeitel 1993-94) and Hildebeitel (this volume) on the older “tribal” models of the MBh’s authorship.

6. The traditional axiom is that when milk and water are mixed, a swan can drink only the milk and leave the water (i.e. a wise man can discriminate and identify good qualities apparently indissolubly mixed in among bad ones).

7. The figures of 10,141 verses for book 3 and 1,635 as the total verses of books 15-18 combined are taken from Brockington 1998: 60-61.

Bibliography

- Biardeau, Madeleine. 1968. "Some More Considerations about Textual Criticism." *Purāṇam* 10,2: 115-123.
- Biardeau, Madeleine. 2002. *Le Mahābhārata: Un récit fondateur du brahmanisme et son interprétation*. 2 vols. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Bigger, Andreas. 2002. "The Normative Redaction of the Mahābhārata: Possibilities and Limitations of a Working Hypothesis." In *Stages and Transitions: Temporal and Historical Frameworks in Epic and Purāṇic Literature. Proceedings of the Second Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, August 1999*. Ed. Mary Brockington. 17-31. Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
- Brockington, John. 1998. *The Sanskrit Epics*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Brockington, Mary, ed. 2002. *Stages and Transitions: Temporal and Historical Frameworks in Epic and Purāṇic Literature. Proceedings of the Second Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, August 1999*. Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
- Brodbeck, Simon Pearce. 2009. *The Mahābhārata Patriline: Gender, Culture and the Royal Hereditary*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Dunham, John. 1991. "Manuscripts Used in the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata: A Survey and Discussion." In *Essays on the Mahābhārata*. Ed. Arvind Sharma. 1-18. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Fitzgerald, James L. 1991. "India's Fifth Veda: The Mahābhārata's Presentation of Itself." In *Essays on the Mahābhārata*. Arvind Sharma. 150-171. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. 1993-1994. "Epic Studies: Classical Hinduism in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa." *Journal of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 74 (Amṛtamahotsava Supplementary Volume): 1-62.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. 2001. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. 2005. "Not Without Subtales: Telling Laws and Truths in Sanskrit Epics." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33: 455-511.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. 2006. "The Nārāyaṇīya and the Early Reading Communities of the Mahābhārata." In *Between the Empires: Society in Indian 300 BCE - 400 CE*. Ed. Patrick Olivelle. 227-256. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. "On Sukthankar's 'S' and Some Shortsighted Assessments and Uses of the Pune Critical Edition." *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19,2 (Spring) 89-128.

- Katz, Ruth Cecily. 1989. *Arjuna in the Mahābhārata: Where Krishna is, there is Victory*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Kinjawadekar, Pandit Ramchandrashastri, ed. 1929-1936. *The Mahābhāratam with Nīlakaṇṭha's Commentary Bhāratabhāvadīpa*. 7 vols. Poona: Shankar Narhar Joshi (Citrashala Press).
- Mahadevan, Thennilapuram P. 2008. "On the Southern Recension of the Mahābhārata: Brahman Migrations and Brāhmī Paleography." *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 15,2: 1-143.
- Mahadevan, Thennilapuram P. 2009. "Textual Support for Early Integrity of the Mahābhārata from its Southern Recension." Paper presented at the 14th World Sanskrit Conference, Kyoto, Japan.
- Mahadevan, Thennilapuram P. "The Three Rails of the Mahābhārata Text Tradition." *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19,2 (Spring), 23-70.
- Olivelle, Patrick, ed. 2006. *Between the Empires: Society in Indian 300 BCE - 400 CE*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Proudfoot, Ian. 1979. "Interpreting Mahābhārata Episodes as Sources for The History of Ideas." *Journal of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 60,1: 41-63.
- Sukthankar, Vishnu Sitaram et al, eds. 1933-1966. *The Mahābhārata: for the First Time Critically Edited*. 19 vols. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- Winternitz, Moriz. 1908-22. *Geschichte der indischen Literatur*. 3 vols. Leipzig: C. F. Amelangs Verlag.